

## **Introduction to 'The Selfish Giant,' By Jarlath Killeen:**

This text version: <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/E850003-009/index.html>

'The Selfish Giant' is usually considered to be a slight tale to be passed over quickly, but it should be taken much more seriously by Wilde scholars and critics. Not only is it probably Wilde's most popular fairy story, it also appears to have had a special place in Wilde's own heart. According to his son Vyvyan Holland, it was a story that brought Wilde to tears because 'really beautiful things always made him cry'.<sup>i</sup> Walter Pater, generally a perceptive reader of his former student's work, specifically praised 'The Selfish Giant', in a letter to Wilde on 12 June 1888, noting the 'beauty and tenderness' of the story which he considered 'perfect in its kind'.<sup>ii</sup> There is certainly a strange and compelling beauty to the story, and children rarely tire of it, and this indicates that there is so much to the story rather than so little. As the story concerns relations between a large, powerful male figure and a group of children, it can be easily translated by its main readers/hearers as concerning the apparent tyranny sometimes exercised by those grown-ups closest to them who decide everything from waking times to sleeping times, meal times, bath times, even play times and who can easily be seen as overweening and arbitrary rule makers whose only interest is in destroying childish fun. Interestingly, fathers – traditionally the ultimate rule makers – are rarely to be found playing a significant role in children's literature. Fathers in children's literature are generally either dead (think of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1881-2) where Jim Hawkins' father dies in chapter 3, or Francis Hodgson Burnett's novels *Little Lord Fauntleroy*

(1885-6), *The Little Princess* (1904) and *The Secret Garden* (1910), all of which have a protagonist whose father dies at the start of the plot) or off-stage (think of Mr. March in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868-9) off serving as a chaplain for the Union army, Mr. Waterbury in E. Nesbit's *The Railway Children* (1905), wrongly imprisoned for treason, or even 'Uncle Quentin', George's father in Enid Blyton's Famous Five series (1942-63), who is constantly being kidnapped and held to ransom when he is not hiding out in his study) for most of the adventures, and when they do appear it is to enforce rules or to insist on their ultimate authority. Fathers are no fun in children's literature, and many are like the father in Mary Martha Sherwood's *The History of the Fairchild Family* (1818-47). The children in this cheery number are taken by their father to see the hanged body of a criminal as a good way to remind them of their own sinfulness and ultimate death, and who tells them that he stands in the place of God as far as they are concerned. Or poor Mr. Brown in Richmal Crompton's Just William stories (192-70), a man who appears to detest his son, and whose only function is to upbraid William when he gets into yet another scrape. When absent, the place of the father is not altogether neglected, and tends to be filled by father substitutes who must be struggled against and overcome in order for the child protagonist to grow and survive. Long John Silver is an obvious father substitute in *Treasure Island*, and if Jim Hawkins starts by thinking he has found a father figure who will lead him on a life of liberating adventure he soon finds that Silver is in fact a castrating father determined to ultimately kill him. The 'Doctor' in Thomas Hughes' *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857) is another such substitute father figure, though this time the schoolboys must grow to accept his rules and regulations and try to emulate

him. Importantly, however, he too must die at the end, and Tom must visit his tomb (as if to make sure that he really is dead) before finally becoming a real man. These examples could be easily multiplied, the important point being that fathers in children's literature must either die or be overcome in order for the child to grow up – and replace them. Given that, as Bruno Bettelheim pointed out, it is rather upsetting for children to contemplate consciously the death or injury of their own fathers, or accept that they actually want to be themselves the cause of his death or injury, substitute or symbolic fathers are necessary: you can safely do to a symbolic father what you would unconsciously desire but ultimately fear to do to your own father.<sup>iii</sup> Size in stories about giants need not be taken very literally, but merely as an indication of the kinds of odds the (much smaller) heroes of these stories must overcome in order to reach their destinies. Giants are suitable figures for men of power, like fathers, and it is not a surprise to find that they frequently appear in fairy tales, monstrous and terrifying versions of the patriarch in the home, and therefore appropriate figures for children to imagine killing violently. Perhaps the most famous example of this can be found in the 'Jack cycle' of English folk tales, traceable to the medieval period but only emerging in print in the eighteenth century, including such standards as 'Jack and the Beanstalk', 'Jack the Giant Killer', 'The Brave Little Tailor'. In these stories, not only is the giant/father killed, but Jack himself (the 'son') is the one orchestrating or performing the death. In becoming a father/giant killer, Jack attains maturity. Indeed, in Benjamin Tabart's version of *The History of Jack and the Beanstalk* (1807), the Giant has actually killed Jack's father years before the story begins, so that his function as a father substitute is even clearer. Wilde's

‘The Selfish Giant’ is indebted to these folk precedents, but, perhaps because it is a story written by a (rather tall) father for his own sons, it significantly moves in a different direction. Here, the Giant’s rules and regulations have to be overcome, but the Giant himself survives and is transformed rather than killed. If fairy tale giants tend to be rather stupid, child-eating cannibals, this is a Giant who can be brought to appreciate the merits of the children he initially wishes to despatch (he is clearly a precedent-setting figure for Roald Dahl’s *The BFG* (1982)). The Giant/father is redeemed rather than destroyed. Moreover, there is no sense that the children ‘grow up’ and reach emotional or sociological maturity when they overcome the obstacles represented by the Giant. Indeed, they remain perpetual children, and it is the Giant who ages while they remain in a kind of *Tír na nÓg*. The Giant/father has his uses for them, and the children play with him for years and in some ways they end up incorporating his power. After all, giants, while certainly father figures, also represent ‘excess’ in more general terms – obviously, they are physically ‘excessive’, overspilling boundaries of bodily normality, but such physical extravagance can be read as indicative of ‘excess’ in psychological and symbolic terms. As the Giant dies, covered over by the white blossoms of the pear trees in the garden, he is incorporated back into nature and expressed in the most natural things in the garden itself – the children. The giant is, after all, one of the major archetypes of Carl Jung and represents strength, energy, and power, so that it is psychologically useful for children not simply to ‘overcome’ the Giant but to internalise him as well. Again, this does not make them grow up, but renders their childhood ever the more powerful. As a powerful

and transformative tale for both fathers and children, read aloud to Wilde's own sons in the Tite Street nursery, this is still a story to cherish.

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<sup>i</sup> Vyvyan Holland, *Son of Oscar*, foreword by Merlin Holland (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 53-4.

<sup>ii</sup> Reprinted in Karl Beckson, ed., *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), pp. 59-60.

<sup>iii</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1976).

## TEXT

### *The Selfish<sup>iv</sup> Giant<sup>v</sup>*

EVERY afternoon, as they were coming from school, the children used to go and play in the Giant's<sup>vi</sup> garden.<sup>vii</sup>

It was a large lovely garden, with soft green grass. Here and there over the grass stood beautiful flowers like stars,<sup>viii</sup> and there were twelve<sup>ix</sup> peach-trees<sup>x</sup> that in the springtime broke out into delicate blossoms of pink and pearl, and in the autumn bore rich fruit. The birds sat on the trees and sang so sweetly that the children used to stop their games in order to listen to them. 'How happy we are here!' they cried to each other. [end of 45]

One day the Giant came back.<sup>xi</sup> He had been to visit his friend the Cornish<sup>xii</sup> ogre,<sup>xiii</sup> and had stayed with him for seven years.<sup>xiv</sup> After the seven years were over he had said all that he had to say, for his conversation was limited,<sup>xv</sup> and he determined to return to his own castle. When he arrived he saw the children playing in the garden.<sup>xvi</sup>

'What are you doing there?' he cried in a very gruff voice, and the children ran away.<sup>xvii</sup>

'My own garden is my own garden,' said the Giant; 'any one can understand that, and I will allow nobody to play in it but myself.' So he built a high wall all round it,<sup>xviii</sup> and put up a notice-board.

TRESPASSERS

WILL BE

PROSECUTED<sup>xix</sup>

He was a very selfish Giant.

The poor children had now nowhere to [end of 46] play. They tried to play on the road, but the road was very dusty and full of hard stones, and they did not like it. They used to wander round the high wall when their lessons were over, and talk about the beautiful garden inside. 'How happy we were there,' they said to each other.

Then the Spring came, and all over the country there were little blossoms and little birds. Only in the garden of the Selfish Giant it was still winter. The birds did not care to sing in it as there were no children, and the trees forgot to blossom.<sup>xx</sup> Once a beautiful flower put its head out from the grass, but when it saw the notice-board it was so sorry for the children that it slipped back into the ground again, and went off to sleep. The only people who were pleased were the Snow and the Frost.<sup>xxi</sup> 'Spring has forgotten this garden,' they cried, 'so we will live here all the year round.' The Snow covered up the grass with her great white cloak, and the [end of 47] Frost painted all the trees silver. Then they invited the North Wind<sup>xxii</sup> to stay with them, and he

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came. He was wrapped in furs, and he roared all day about the garden, and blew the chimney-pots down. 'This is a delightful spot,' he said, 'we must ask the Hail on a visit.' So the Hail came. Every day for three hours he rattled on the roof of the castle till he

broke most of the slates, and then he ran round and round the garden as fast as he could go. He was dressed in grey, and his breath was like ice.

‘I cannot understand why the Spring is so late in coming,’ said the Selfish Giant, as he sat at the window and looked out at his cold white garden; ‘I hope there will be a change in the weather.’

But the Spring never came, nor the Summer. The Autumn gave golden fruit to every garden, but to the Giant's garden she gave none. ‘He is too selfish,’ she said. So it was always Winter there, and the North [end of 48] Wind and the Hail, and the Frost, and the Snow danced about through the trees.

One morning the Giant was lying awake in bed when he heard some lovely music. It sounded so sweet to his ears that he thought it must be the King's musicians passing by. It was really only a little linnet singing outside his window, but it was so long since he had heard a bird sing in his garden that it seemed to him to be the most beautiful music in the world. Then the Hail stopped dancing over his head, and the North Wind ceased roaring, and a delicious perfume came to him through the open casement. ‘I believe the Spring has come at last,’ said the Giant; and he jumped out of bed and looked out.

What did he see?

He saw a most wonderful sight. Through a little hole in the wall the children had crept in, and they were sitting in the branches of the trees. In every tree that he could [end of 49] see there was a little child. And the trees were so glad to have the children back again that they had covered themselves with blossoms, and were waving their arms gently above the



children's heads. The birds were flying about and twittering with delight, and the flowers were looking up through the green grass and laughing. It was a lovely scene, only in one corner it was still winter. It was the farthest corner of the garden, and in it was standing a little boy. He was so small that he could not reach up to the branches of the tree, and he was wandering all round it, crying bitterly. The poor tree was still quite covered with frost and snow, and the North Wind was blowing and roaring above it. 'Climb up! little boy,' said the Tree, and it bent its branches down as low as it could; but the boy was too tiny.

And the Giant's heart melted as he looked out. 'How selfish I have been!' he said; [end of 50] 'now I know why the Spring would not come here. I will put that poor little boy on the top of the tree, and then I will knock down the wall, and my garden shall be the children's playground for ever and ever.' He was really very sorry for what he had done.

So he crept downstairs and opened the front door quite softly, and went out into the garden. But when the children saw him they were

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so frightened that they all ran away, and the garden became winter again. Only the little boy did not run, for his eyes were so full of tears that he did not see the Giant coming. And the Giant stole up behind him and took him gently in his hand, and put him up into the tree.<sup>xxiii</sup> And the tree broke at once into blossom, and the birds came and sang on it, and the little boy stretched out his two arms and flung them round the Giant's neck, and

kissed him. And the other children, when they saw that the Giant was not wicked [end of 51] any longer, came running back, and with them came the Spring. 'It is your garden now, little children,' said the Giant, and he took a great axe and knocked down the wall. And when the people were going to market at twelve o'clock they found the Giant playing with the children in the most beautiful garden they had ever seen.

All day long they played, and in the evening they came to the Giant to bid him good-bye.

'But where is your little companion?' he said: 'the boy I put into the tree.' The Giant loved him the best because he had kissed him.<sup>xxiv</sup>

'We don't know,' answered the children; 'he has gone away.'

'You must tell him to be sure and come here to-morrow,' said the Giant. But the children said that they did not know where he lived, and had never seen him before; and the Giant felt very sad. [end of 52]

Every afternoon, when school was over, the children came and played with the Giant.<sup>xxv</sup> But the little boy whom the Giant loved was never seen again. The Giant was very kind to all the children, yet he longed for his first little friend, and often spoke of him. 'How I would like to see him!' he used to say.

Years went over, and the Giant grew very old and feeble. He could not play about any more, so he sat in a huge armchair, and watched the children at their games, and admired his garden.<sup>xxvi</sup> 'I have many beautiful flowers,' he said; 'but the children are the most beautiful flowers of all.'

One winter morning he looked out of his window as he was dressing. He did not hate the Winter now, for he knew that it was merely the Spring asleep, and that the flowers were resting.

Suddenly he rubbed his eyes in wonder, [end of 53] and looked and looked. It certainly was a marvellous sight. In the farthest corner of the garden was a tree quite covered with lovely white blossoms. Its branches were all golden, and silver fruit hung down from them, and underneath it stood the little boy he had loved.

Downstairs ran the Giant in great joy, and out into the garden. He hastened across the grass, and came near to the child. And when he came quite close his face grew red with anger, and he said, 'Who hath dared to wound thee?'<sup>xxvii</sup> For on the palms of the child's hands were the prints of two nails, and the prints of two nails were on the little feet.<sup>xxviii</sup>

'Who hath dared to wound thee?' cried the Giant; 'tell me, that I may take my big sword and slay him.'

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'Nay!' answered the child; 'but these are the wounds of Love.'

'Who art thou?' said the Giant, and a [end of 54] strange awe fell on him, and he knelt before the little child.

And the child smiled on the Giant, and said to him, 'You let me play once in your garden, to-day you shall come with me to my garden, which is Paradise.'<sup>xxix</sup>

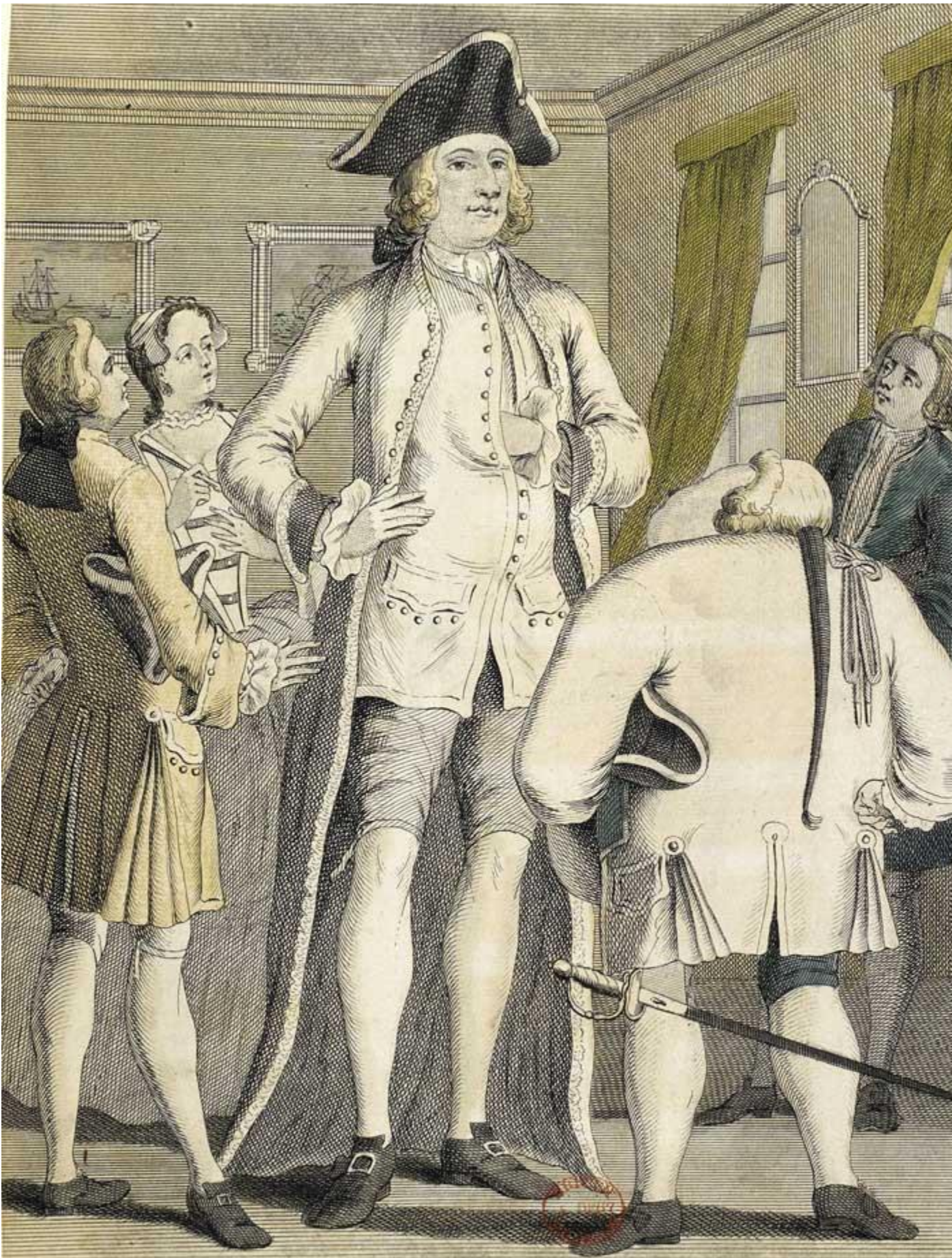
And when the children ran in that afternoon, they found the Giant lying dead under the tree, all covered with white blossoms.<sup>xxx</sup>

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<sup>iv</sup> Selfishness and narcissism are central to Wilde's writing – generally as obstacles to be overcome in the journey towards fulfilment. In the collection, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, for example, the Happy Prince must overcome a kind of insulated egoism in which he has lived his life in 'Sans Souci' and encounter the difficulties and challenges others (especially the poor) face; the 'Swallow' has to overcome his own desires for comfort and enjoyment in a life of ease in Egypt in order to stay behind and help the Happy Prince in his self-sacrificing love for others. For these acts of self sacrifice, they are both rewarded by God with a place in Paradise. At other times in the collection, however, it is not clear what is to be gained from overcoming selfishness. For example, in 'The Devoted Friend', the Miller is clearly utterly self-obsessed and unwilling to help his 'best friend' Hans despite his hunger and poverty, and this unselfishness continues until Hans dies while trying to help the Miller. However, the Miller is certainly never 'punished' for this behaviour in the story, and he continues as happy as he has ever been. Likewise, in 'The Remarkable Rocket' the selfishly self-satisfied obsession of the title character is never overcome, and he learns no 'lesson' from his adventures, and he is not (apparently) the worse off for it. On the other hand, the Nightingale in 'The Nightingale and the Rose' unselfishly gives her own life to help the Student gain the love of the Professor's daughter. Neither of these two characters deserve such a sacrifice and with the discarding of the rose built out of the bird's life blood, the Nightingale appears to have died in vain. For more on this theme see Rodney Shewan, *Oscar Wilde: Art and Egoism* (London: Macmillan, 1977).

<sup>v</sup> The term 'giant' is rather nebulous, and has a huge variety of possible meanings. Obviously, the term indicates the excessive size of a character. The term 'giant' is not one applied to those who are simply taller than average and whose height is due to robust health and genetic inheritance. A person is defined as a 'giant' medically when they suffer from 'gigantism', a condition generally caused by a tumour of the pituitary gland which results in the secretion of too much growth hormone, and is accompanied by a host of other physical problems including severe physical weakness (so much for the popular image of the giant as having unnatural strength), very large hands and feet, persistent headaches and problems with vision. Wilde himself was believed by at least one person to be a sufferer of gigantism. In 1916, in a letter to accompany Frank Harris' biography of Wilde, George Bernard Shaw expressed his belief that Wilde's homosexuality was somehow 'caused' by his inheriting gigantism from his mother, 'Speranza'. Certainly, Speranza was very tall and ungainly, especially next to her husband who was small by comparison, and this was the cause of a number of jokes at their expense. Wilde himself was a tall man (six feet three inches) with rather large physical features – Lady Campbell famously called him a 'great white caterpillar' – but there is no medical evidence that either himself or his mother were sufferers of gigantism and more importantly no evidence that there is any connection between gigantism and same-sex desire. See George Bernard Shaw, 'My memories of Oscar Wilde', in *Oscar Wilde* by Frank Harris (New York: Dorset Press, 1989), pp. 329-46. Gigantism is evidenced by *extreme* height – over seven feet – by which token, neither Wilde nor his mother were actual giants. Real giants, those who probably did suffer from gigantism, have long been objects of fascination, and many made their living by displaying themselves as objects of interest for the curious. *The Daily Advertiser* for the 3 June, 1745, reported that: 'The god of wine and deity of wit have long gone hand-in-hand, and to keep them both alive the best way is to blend them; therefore, for the reception of the curious, they have provided the best of their productions; and, as varieties in nature are as pleasing as those of art, the greatest that can be shown is every evening to be seen as the Wells, viz. a young Colossus, who, though not 16, is seven feet four inches high, has drawn more company this season than was ever known before, and must convince the world that the ancient race of Britons is not extinct, but that we may yet hope to see a race of giant-like heroes' (quoted in C. J. S. Thompson, *The Mystery and Lore of Monsters* (New York: University Books, 1968), pp. 160-1). Giants have also toured as members of freak shows and circuses. Some of the more famous ones include the following: Henry Blacker, 'the British Giant', from Cuckfield in Sussex, who started touring in 1751, aged 26.







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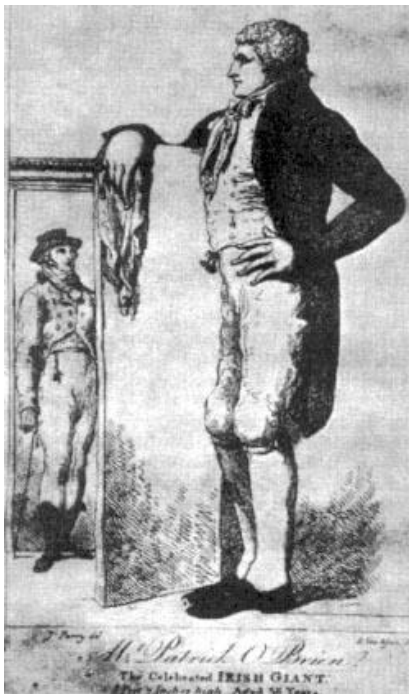
Henry Blacker.

Bernardo Gigli, an eight foot Italian Giant, exhibited in England in 1755; the 'Cambridge Giant', Thomas Bell, about seven feet two inches, toured England in 1813; 'The British Phenomenon', one Miss Hold from Somersetshire (seven feet tall) toured in 1826; Charles Freeman, seven foot six inches, hailing from Michigan, was a huge attraction in London in the 1840s, as well as acting in *The Son of the Desert and Demon Changeling*, in a part written specifically for him; Joseph Brice, the 'Giant of the Mountains', from Ramonchamp (about eight feet tall), toured England and Ireland in 1860s; Chang Woo Gow, an eight foot, two inch Chinese giant, toured England, with his friend, a three-foot dwarf, Chung, in 1865-6; 'Miss Marion, the Queen of the Amazons' was on display in London, 1882 (measuring eight foot, six inches). There were also a number of very famous Irish giants in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Cornelius MacGrath, from Tipperary and measuring seven foot, went to London to launch a career in 1752. After he died tragically young, his body was stolen and displayed around Europe. Charles Byrne (O'Brien), the 'Irish giant' (eight foot, two inches), toured in London, 1782, died aged only 23 in 1783 (probably brought on by his excessive alcohol drinking) and his skeleton is now on display in the Hunterian Museum, London.



Charles Byrne, the 'Irish Giant'.

The Knipe Twins were on tour in 1785, and described as 'Irish Giants...twenty-four years of age, and measur[ing] very near eight feet high. ...they are beyond what is set forth in ancient or modern history' (quoted in Edward Wood, *Giants and Dwarfs* (London: Bentley, 1868), pp. 172-3). Patrick Cotter O'Brien, a native of Kinsale, toured around Ireland in the 1790s, claiming to be a descendant of the medieval king Brian Boru. He measured eight feet three inches.



Patrick Cotter O'Brien, another Irish giant.

Clancy, a seven foot two inch Irish Giant, appeared in a freak show in 1833. Murphy, from Co. Down, measured nine feet tall and went to exhibit himself on the Continent on the invitation of the Emperor and Empress. Giants were often in the Victorian news, sometimes for the wrong reasons. There was a famous 'giant fraud' of the so-called 'Cardiff giant' in America in 1869. This was a giant created by a New York tobacconist, George Hull, who wanted to 'prove' that there had once been a race of giants on earth. The fraud was both elaborate and expensive, but many people completely bought the story that the petrified remains of a giant had been discovered when a well was being dug on a farm owned by one of Hull's cousins. Although declared a fake by archeological experts, a giant replica was created and displayed by P. T. Barnum as the 'real' giant while he declared Hull's giant a fake. It is out of this incident that the famous comment, 'there's a sucker born every minute' emerged. See Scott Tribble, *A Colossal Hoax: The Giant From Cardiff that Fooled America* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009).

vi Giants are basic to much of the myth, legend and literature of the world, and Wilde is clearly not only aware of many these precedents, but is drawing on some of them in the thematic structure of the story. Obviously, it would be absolutely impossible to go through every single instance of gigantism in world myth and literature, and here I will simply refer to the most important of them, pointing out in some cases where they may have impacted on 'The Selfish Giant'.

Wilde's knowledge of the Bible was extensive, and there are a number of references to giants to be found there. The book of Genesis tells of the days when 'giants walked the earth', the children of unions between human women and angels (Genesis 6: 1-4): 'And it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born unto them, that the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair, and they took them wives of all that they chose... There were giants on the earth in those days; and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bore children to them, the same became mighty men'. This passage is echoed by one in the apocryphal book of Enoch (7: 2), where these sons of God are described as angels: 'and when the angels, the sons of heaven, beheld them, they became enamoured of them, saying to each other, Come, let us select for ourselves wives from the progeny of men, and let us beget children'. These fallen angels are called the Grigori, or 'watchers', and the offspring were giants called 'nephilim' ('to fall'). The Flood is sent by God in order to kill the Giants who



were at war with men (Enoch 7: 4-6): ‘the giants had consumed all the acquisitions of men. And when men could no longer sustain them, the giants turned against them and devoured mankind. And they began to sin against birds, and beasts, and reptiles, and fish, and to devour one another’s flesh, and drink the blood’. Giants still manage to pop up even in postdiluvian world – including perhaps the most famous story from the Bible concerning a Giant, the contest between David and Goliath in 1 Samuel 17: 21-58. Goliath is a soldier in the Philistine army at war with Israel, and he is besting Israelite fighters due to his enormous size (‘six cubits and a span’) and strength (though, were Goliath really a sufferer of gigantism he would tend towards physical weakness rather than strength). David, despite being much smaller, manages to defeat Goliath by using a slingshot, hitting his gigantic enemy between the eyes with a stone, and felling him. This scene has been enormously popular with artists through the centuries, many of them presenting David as a young boy.



Donato di Niccolò di Betto Bardi (Donatello), *David* (commissioned 1430).



Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *David and Goliath* (1606).

In these Biblical tales, giants are creatures to be overcome and destroyed by the godly and the righteous, they are representatives of both monstrous humanity and the existence of sin and death. Wilde's Giant rushing out into the garden to expel the children is not unlike the warlike Goliath meeting the comparatively small David (who is a forerunner of Christ Himself).

In mythology, giants are usually connected to the forces of creation and the cycle of fertility. Ancient creation myths often involve the struggles of heroes with giants in order to get the natural world into some kind of order. This clearly plays into Wilde's story which dramatises a disordered natural world caused by a dispute between a gigantic father figure and 'his' children. Mythological giants are often depicted as the earliest inhabitants of the earth before the coming of humans, and these giants need to be vanquished. They are also often connected to meteorological phenomena, to fertility rites, the earth, and are sometimes treated as shapers of the planet. In Norse mythology the giant Ymir and his children are defeated in battle by Bor, Odin, Vili and Ve who go on to make the earth out of the physical remains of Ymir. The mountain giants Hrim-thursar and Berg-riser are defeated by Thor. In Greek Mythology the giants Alcioneus, Pallas, Enceladus and Porphyryon are the offspring of the blood spilt by Uranus when he is wounded. Many of the gods of Greek mythology are gigantic including Atlas (supporter of the earth) and

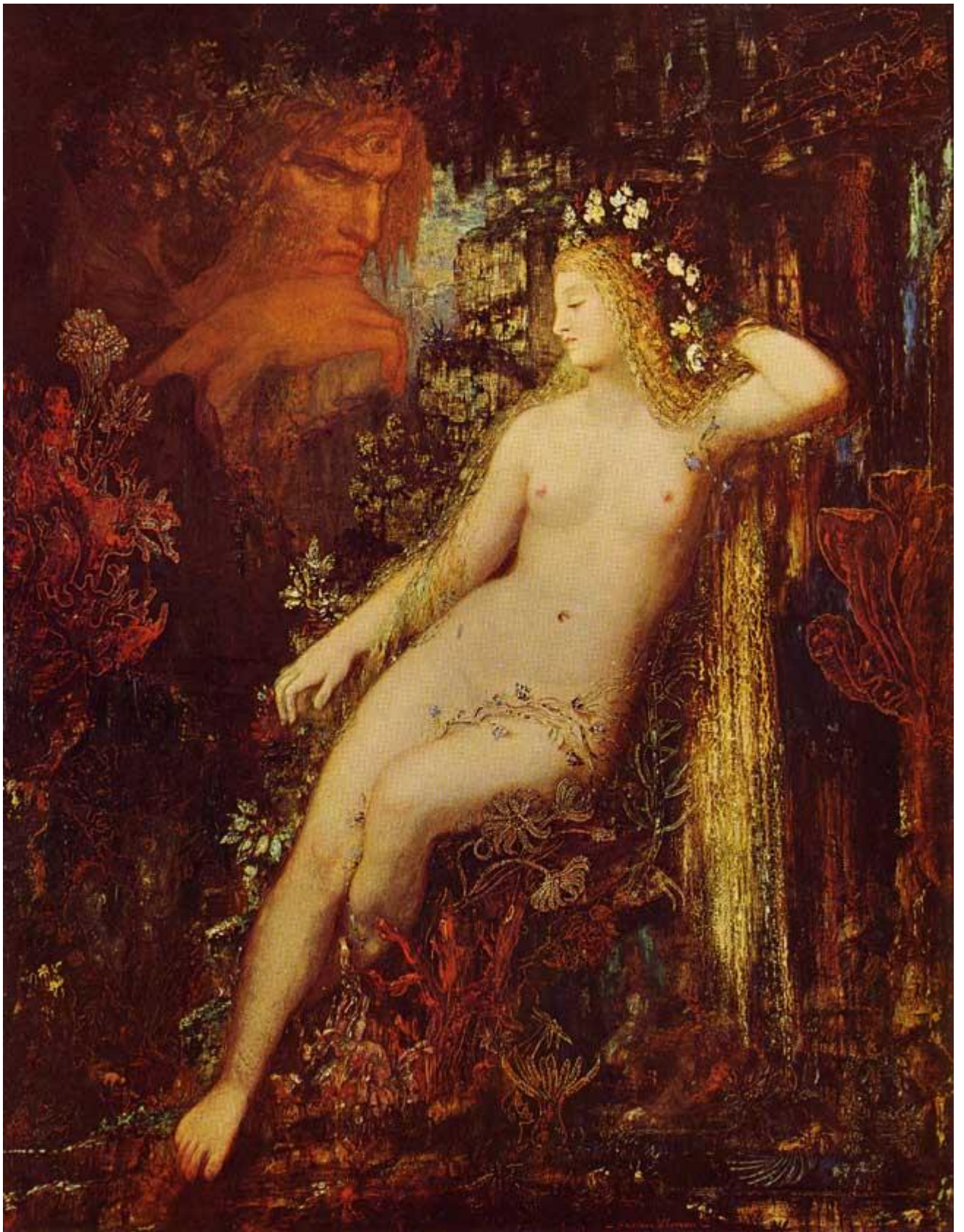
Chronos (time). Chronos is especially important here as he is generally depicted as an ogre and is shown eating his children.



Francisco de Goya, *Saturn Devouring One of His Children* (c. 1820-23).

Other Greek giants include Cyclopes (there are three Cyclopes mentioned in Hesiod [Arges, Brontes, Steropes]); the Titans; the Hecatonchires (hundred-handed monsters). Poseidon fathered several giants, including Antaeus, Orion, and the Cyclops Polyphemus who falls in love with the sea-nymph Galatea.





Gustave Moreau, *Galatea* (1880) – this painting, with which Wilde was undoubtedly familiar, bizarrely depicts Polyphemus with two eyes.

Polyphemus makes a famous appearance in Homer's *Odyssey* when Ulysses and his men stay in the country of the Cyclopes on their way back to Greece. The cannibalistic Polyphemus imprisons the travellers in a cave, but Ulysses out-wits him, gorging his single eye out, and escaping. Heracles was a large man rather than a giant, but many later writers referred to him as a giant. Heracles also had, during his twelve labours, an encounter with another giant, Cacus, in the cave in Mount Aventine.

In the eight-century anonymous Anglo-Saxon poem, *Beowulf*, a cannibalistic ogre called Grendel is descended from Cain (he is able to eat 15 men). The poem dramatises the struggle between pagan forces, represented by Grendel and his mother, against the Christian Beowulf. Likewise, in *The Faerie Queen* (1590-96), by Edmund Spenser, the Redcrosse Knight, representative of the forces of Protestant Christianity, needs to escape from the giant Orgoglio who holds him captive in Book One, Cantos 7 and 8. In Arthurian Myth, giants are among the enemies who need to be overcome by the righteous. For example, Tristan must defeat the giant Urgan the Hairy, a story depicted in A. G. Swinburne's *Tristram of Lyonesse* (1882). In John Milton's *Paradise Lost* Satan is described as 'in bulk as huge/As whom the fables name of monstrous size' (Book 1, 196-7). Another monster, this time man-made, features in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), where the hero's creation is described as being 'of gigantic stature; that is to say, about eight feet in height' (Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, ed. Maurice Hindle (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 54).

Children's literature is a rich source for stories about giants, especially if fairy tales are taken into account. Charles Perrault's *Contes du temps passé* (1697) contains the story of Bluebeard who is depicted as an ogre, and 'Tom Thumb' has an ogre as well – again, one overcome by a much smaller figure. One of Perrault's tales, 'Hop o' My Thumb' was translated into English in 1724 in a version which included the now famous lines: 'Fee Fie Fo Fum/I smell the blood of an Englishman/Be he alive or be he dead/I'll grind his bones to make my bread' (quoted in Marina Warner, *No Go the Bogeyman: Scaring, Lulling and Making Mock* (London: Vintage, 2000), p. 313). The stories of the 'Jack Cycle', a group of English folk tales featuring a clever and quick-witted farmer's son, Jack, include 'Jack the Giant Killer' and 'Jack and the Beanstalk'. In *Alice in Wonderland*, Lewis Carroll's heroine keeps changing in size dramatically, being as small as Thumbelina one minute, and as tall as a giant the next. A thorough analysis of the story would need to draw out all the debts owed to this body of literature (and others not mentioned here).

vii Wilde grew up near an enclosed garden in Merrion Square, which could only be accessed by residents who had a key, so the image of the private, exclusive garden would have been familiar to him from his personal life. See Davis Coakley, *Oscar Wilde: The Importance of Being Irish* (Dublin: Town House and Country House, 1995), pp. 110-11. Obviously, Wilde is also drawing here on the Biblical Garden of Eden out of which God's children Adam and Eve were expelled because they ate the forbidden fruit in Genesis 4: 22-24: 'And the Lord God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever: Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken. So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life'. Here, the Giant operates rather like a more impulsive version of the Old Testament God in kicking his children out of the garden although they have not apparently eaten of any forbidden fruit – here the fault is 'trespassing'. Have these children re-entered the Garden from which our first parents were exiled? In other words, is this a garden of Eden which is out of bounds to humans? 'Trespassing' has also biblical connotations, meaning to commit an offence or to transgress. The Lord's Prayer, given by Jesus to his disciples, includes the request that the Father will 'forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us'. There are two versions of the Lord's Prayer given in the Gospels, one in Matthew 6: 9-13, the other in Luke 11:2-4, and although the important word is 'debt' in Matthew and 'sin' in Luke, the *Book of Common Prayer* (1662) provided a translation of the word as 'trespasses'. Christian connotations are particularly strong in 'The Selfish Giant'. The Giant is both a father figure and a kind of God who must be brought to 'forgive' the 'trespass' of his children because of the self-sacrifice of the child he loves best ('His only Son'), and allow the children back into the Garden (which is paradise). It is unclear whether this is intended as a muted criticism or satire of the Biblical God – did he over-react to the trespass of Adam and Eve in exiling them from the

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Garden? Should he now let his children back into the garden and allow them the enjoyment of the fruit there – to finally eat the fruit of the tree of life and therefore enjoy everlasting life?

viii        There are any number of flowers that can be said to be shaped like stars, including daisies and asters, borage.

ix         The number of peach trees is twelve, probably in reference to the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles. In the book of Revelation there are twelve gates of the celestial City (Rv 21,12); twelve kinds of precious stone of the celestial City (Rv 21,19-20); twelve stars on the crown that the woman wears (Rv 12,2); the trees of life, which bear twelve crops of fruit in a year, one in each month (Rv 22,2). In some numerological systems, twelve is the number of completion and harmony.

x          That the fruits in this garden are peaches does return us somewhat to the Genesis narrative. Although the trespass of our first parents is traditionally associated with the eating of an apple, there is no specific fruit mentioned in Genesis. A peach connects the forbidden fruit eating to sexual transgression given its association with succulence and its shape. One definition of ‘peach’ provided by the Oxford English Dictionary is ‘A particularly fine or desirable person or thing, *esp.* an attractive young woman’. The peach was associated with the forbidden fruit by a number of nineteenth century writers. The American Eugene Field’s (1850-1895) poem for children, ‘The Little Peach’ features little Johnny and Sue eating a peach and dying, and was originally published in the *Kansas City Times* in 1880 to great acclaim; Christina Rossetti’s ‘Goblin Market’ (1871), includes the peach as among the many dangerous fruits being offered by the goblins. According to Henry Nicholson Ellacombe, ‘we all know and appreciate the fruit of the peach, but few seem to know how ornamental a tree is the Peach, quite independent of the fruit.’ *The Plant-Lore and Garden-Craft of Shakespeare* (London: W. Satchell and Co., 1884 edition), p. 198-9. Peach is the Taoist emblem of immortality, and given Wilde’s interest in Taoism, he would most likely have known about this. Apparently, Pennsylvania Dutch settlers in gave their peach trees a good whipping before eating breakfast on Good Friday morning as a means to get them to produce more fruit, but it is unlikely that Wilde would have known this. (My thanks to Meghanne Flynn for providing me with a great deal more information on peaches – and lots of other things – than I could use here, and for making the whole experience more fun than it should have been).

xi         To where is the Giant returning after his seven year visit to Cornwall? Well, Ireland was typically associated with giants. In his bizarrely influential *Researches into the Physical History of Man* (1813), Dr. James Cowles Prichard claimed that: ‘In Ireland men of uncommon stature are often seen, and even a gigantic form and stature occur there much more frequently than in this island: yet all the British isles derived their stock of inhabitants from the same sources. We can hardly avoid the conclusion that there must be some peculiarity in Ireland which gives rise to these phenomena’ (*Researches into the Physical History of Man* (London: Sherwood, Gilbert and Piper, 1837 edition), vol. 2, p. 562). Prichard may well have been thinking here of the number of Irishmen who ended their days exhibiting themselves as gigantic freaks (the names of some of these men can be found in note 4). Moreover, the association between Ireland and giants continued right through the nineteenth century. Something of a furore was created by the discovery of a fossilized Irish Giant found in Antrim in late nineteenth century, by one Mr. Dyer while prospecting for iron ore (12ft, 2inches) – exhibited in Liverpool and Manchester in 1876. In Ireland’s mythological past there are plenty of giants to choose from, and especially notable are the Fomoiri who are remembered as the gigantic first inhabitants of Ireland and also masters of fertility. Many of the mythological warriors resurrected during the ‘Celtic Twilight’ were often compared to giants, including Cúchulain and Fionn MacCumhaill. Indeed, the Giant’s Causeway on the coast of County Antrim, a series of basalt columns extending into the sea, is said to have been built by two giants, Fionn MacCumhaill and the Scottish giant Benandonner, who were trying to make a highway between Ireland and Scotland in order to have a fight.

xii        Cornwall is, perhaps, the place in the British Isles most associated with giants. It had at least one very famous real giant, the ‘Cornish Giant’, who had a significant role in the Civil War (1642-6). Anthony Payne (at seven feet, six inches), was bodyguard to Sir Beville Granville of Stowe, north Cornwall, a



Royalist, and fought in two battles, the battle of Stamford Hill and the battle of Lansdowne Hill. Cornwall is, however, more associated with mythological than historical giants. Glastonbury and St. Michael's Mount are both sites of tales about legendary giants. In Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* (written c. 1136) he claimed that when the Trojans arrived in Britain, they found a race of giants inhabiting the land and were forced to drive them out in order to take control. Eventually, the giants were driven into the region now called Cornwall (after the Trojan soldier Corineus who was greatly responsible for their extermination). The local leader of the giants in Cornwall was Gogmagog who entered a wrestling contest with Corineus and lost, and was then thrown over a cliff and dashed to pieces. Gogmagog could perhaps be the Cornish ogre the Giant is visiting, but, given the Christian theme of the story, it is more likely that Wilde is referencing the Cornish Giant 'Bolster'. The legend of Bolster tells how he fell in love with a Christian saint, Agnes, a missionary determined to banish paganism (represented by Bolster) from Cornwall. Tired of his constant pursuit, Agnes asks Bolster to prove his love for her by filling in a hole in the ground with his own blood, but, of course, the hole is never full, up Bolster was drained of all blood and died (this hole is apparently at Chapel Porth). This 'overthrow' of paganism by Christianity is obviously echoed by the overcoming of the Giant's selfishness by the Christ child in Wilde's story – except, of course, that Wilde's Giant is spared the necessity of having his blood spilled.



Anthony Payne, the Cornwall Giant.

xiii The word 'ogre' was first introduced into English in a translation of Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy's 'The Orange Tree and its Beloved Bee' in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In this story are two ogres, Ravagio and Tourmentine who discuss eating the flesh of a little girl. The word 'ogre', according to Marina Warner, was taken by the French writer from the Italian Giambattista Basile's *Il Pentamerone* (1633-6). Ogres subsequently appeared in Charles Perrault's 'Puss in Boots', 'Hop o' my Thumb', and 'The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood' – all published in *Contes du temps passé* (1697). Ogres also appear in the Grimm brothers' 'The Juniper Tree' and 'Hansel and Gretel', first published in *Children's and Household Tales* (1812). Related to giants, ogres are hideous-looking and cruel monsters, generally interesting in feasting on human flesh. See Marina Warner, *No Go the Bogyman: Scaring, Lulling and Making Mock* (London: Vintage, 2000), pp. 143-7; Carol Rose, *Giants, Monsters, & Dragons: An Encyclopedia of Folklore, Legend, and Myth* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001).

xiv In many numerological systems, 7 is the most perfect number.

xv This is a very Wildean criticism. It is made of the Reed by the Swallow in 'The Happy Prince', given as a reason for his abandonment of her, and is indicative of the value Wilde himself placed on conversation – of which he was a veritable master.

xvi Relations between giants and children have been usefully theorised by Percy Cohen, a child psychiatrist. He claims out that the giant represents a child's feeling of inferiority to others, especially parents and grown ups: 'all men have experienced childhood; and all children have experienced adults as more powerful, more prestigious, and more experienced than they are; all children have also experienced adults as higher than they are and have come to recognise or, at least, to suppose that greater height has much to do with greater advantage'. 'Psychoanalysis and Cultural Symbolization', *Symbol as Sense: New Approaches to the Analysis of Meaning*, ed. Mary LeCron Foster and Stanley H. Brandes (New York: Academic Press, 1980), p. 59.

xvii

In his *Autobiography* (1938) W. B. Yeats tells a funny story of a Christmas he spent with the Wilde family in Tite Street in 1888, where he inadvertently terrified young Cyril by pretending to be a giant. Unfortunately, the incident occurred after the publication of 'The Selfish Giant'. *Autobiography* (New York, 1965), pp. 87-8.

xviii

Giants have long been associated with the building of large structures. The Anglo-Saxons arrived in England to be greeted by huge megalithic monuments considered the work of pre-Celtic and Celtic giants. It seemed impossible that structures such as Stonehenge had been built by ordinary men like themselves, and giants appeared obvious candidates to have been able to move large stones around. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen points to the 'mythic association of giants and the building of primal architectures' (*Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages* (Minnesota: Minnesota University Press 1999), pp. 24-5), pointing to Norse myths involving the monsters of Jotunheim menacing the god's heavenly abode of Asgarðr.

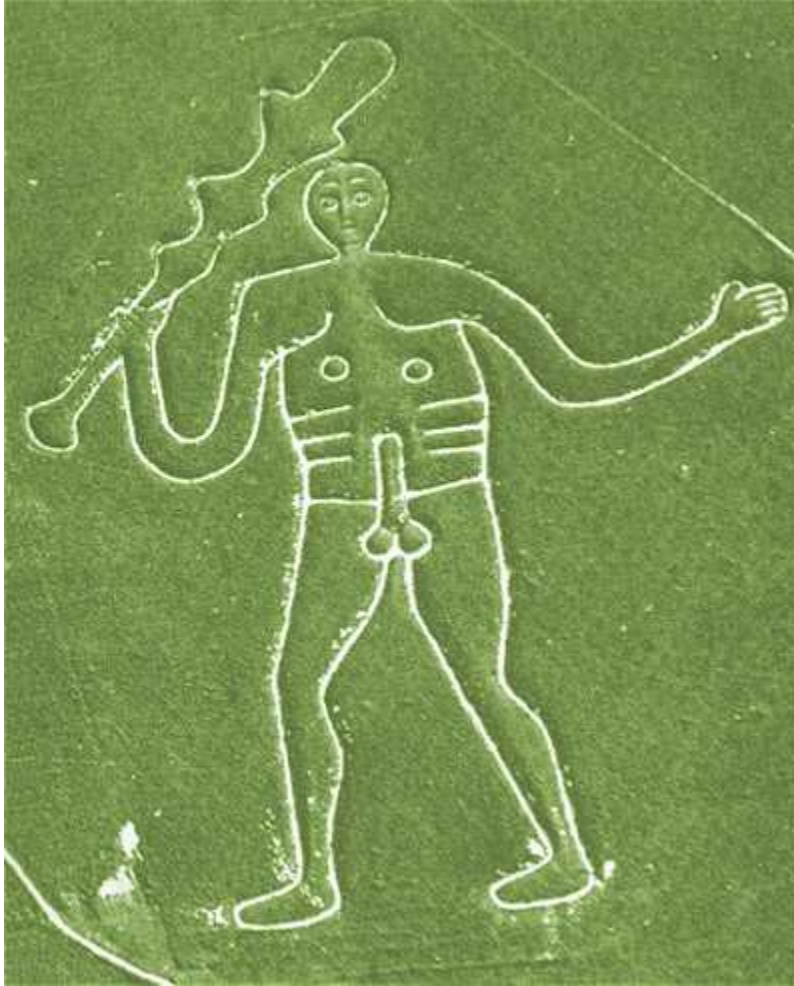
xix

It may be apposite here to mention a possible 'Irish' reading of the story as concerning the dispute over property rights that raged in the second half of the nineteenth century. Owen Dudley Edwards has suggested that it might be useful to see 'the Giant as owner of the Big House with the little children as peasants and, presumably, Catholics' ('Impressions of an Irish Sphinx', *Wilde: The Irishman*, ed. Jerusha McCormack (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 59. Jarlath Killeen has expanded on this reading in his chapter on the story in *The Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde* (London: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 61-78. Moreover, while Oscar Wilde is famous as many things – gay martyr, amoral aesthete, raconteur, even as a socialist and anarchist, Oscar Wilde the Protestant Irish landlord is not a man recognisable to even his most interested of readers and critics – probably because it appears so incongruous beside his other more apparently radical identities. However, landlord he was. Wilde's father had a small holding of thirteen acres of land around Lough Fee on a lease of 150 years (1853), as well as three acres of lake itself, along with ownership of four houses in Bray built in 1861. When Sir William died he left the land around Lough Fee, which had fourteen tenants, to his son Willie, although the rents were to be paid to Lady Wilde for the remainder of her life. Oscar was left the four houses in Bray and the fishing cottage of Illaunroe in County Mayo, all of which he rented out. We have really only two literary glimpses of Wilde the landlord to work with. One letter, probably from October 1876, concerns the renting out of one of the houses in Bray to a Mr. Byrne which instructs 'All the Rents etc. are to be paid to me direct and I am responsible for everything' (*The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, eds Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart Davis (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), p. 34). In 1880 he tried to rent out Illaunroe Cottage to an 'unidentified correspondent' which insists that 'the rent is £40 for one month, £70 for two, £90 for season' (*Letters*, p. 90). We know that Wilde managed to sell his houses in Bray for £2900, although he saw little of this money since the properties were heavily mortgaged and also because Wilde had somehow had the houses sold by two separate agents and one of the potential purchasers brought him to court. This did not, however, end his involvement in landownership if only because his mother's dependence on the rents from the Lough Fee properties placed her in serious financial difficulties. Throughout the 1880s and 1890s the rent from the fourteen tenants rarely turned up. In 1880 Lady Wilde wrote to a friend: 'Ireland is in a very unquiet state – I fear the people will now refuse to pay rents and whoever enforces payment will assuredly be shot – I despair of my beloved Irish at last – we want a strong hand like the Emperor Napoleon's over us'. Refuse to pay rents they did, and even when the situation calmed down arrears were difficult to collect, and she complained in 1883 that while Willie was attempting to look after the property back in Ireland 'nothing is paid, the horizon is very dark for us' (quoted in Joy Melville, *Mother of Oscar – The Life of Jane Francesca Wilde* (London: John Murray, 1994), p. 190). The worry continued. In 1884 we find her writing: 'It is a dreadful thing to have my whole income stopped from Ireland – I receive nothing and the little that is paid is stopped for government charges – we have to pay for all the murders and outrages, and the police etc, and so nothing's left' (*ibid.*, p. 194). Eventually, in 1888, things got so tight that she was forced to appeal to the Royal Literary Fund for a grant explaining that because of the state of the affairs in Ireland between 1880-1888 she had only received £150 from her Irish rents (*ibid.*, p. 222). Wilde himself backed her appeal asking his friend A. H. Sayce to use his influence in obtaining the grant claiming that 'through the unhappy state of things in Ireland her small jointure ... has been unpaid for seven years'



(*Letters*, p. 365). Wilde's role as landlord has been written out of traditional discussions about the influence of Ireland on his work, and we need to carefully consider it when looking at this story.

<sup>xx</sup> Because of the actions of the Giant, natural fertility has been disrupted. Giants have a traditional association with fertility in the British Isle, and giants have been carved into hillsides as part of fertility rites. Perhaps the two most famous examples of this are: the Long Man of Wilmington, carved into Windover Hill, near Eastborne in Sussex, probably in the 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> century, 226 feet tall; the Cerne Abbas Giant, complete with a giant engorged penis, is etched into a hill near the village of Cerne Abbas in Dorset (probably also of 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> century origin). John Koch records that in the nineteenth century the Cerne Abbas giant was considered a fertility god of a sort. Local women believed that sleeping with the giant would guarantee a large number of children, and infertile couples had sex on the Giant's penis for a cure (*Celtic Culture: An Historical Encyclopaedia* (California: ABC-CLIO Inc., 2006) vol. 1, p. 395).



The Cerne Abbas Giant

<sup>xxi</sup> Personification of Snow and Frost, and later Hail, is interesting and important. It connects to English children's literature (see note 22), but also to the poetry of Wilde's mother. Wilde is directly imitating his mother's personifications of the Plague Spirit and Famine in her poem 'Foreshadowings':

With crown and with bow, on his white steed immortal,  
The Angel of Wrath passes first through the portal;  
But faces grow paler, and hush'd is earth's laughter.  
When on his pale steed comes the Plague Spirit after.  
Oremus! Ormeus! His poison breath slayeth;

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The red will soon fade from each bright lip that prayeth.

...

Oh! the golden-hair'd children reck nought but their playing.

Thro' the rich fields of corn with their young mothers straying;

And the strong-hearted men, with their muscles o iron,

What reck they of ills that their pathway environ?

There's a tramp like a knell – a cold shadow gloometh –

Woe! 'tis the black steed of Famine that cometh (Lady Jane Wilde, *Poems by Speranza* (Dublin: James Duffy, 1864), pp. 16-17).

xxii This is almost certainly Wilde's nod to George MacDonald's *At The Back of the North Wind* (1868-70), which involves a country boy called Diamond, who befriends the personified North Wind and has a number of adventures with her. North Wind is something of an ambiguous character since she commits many cruel acts through the course of the novel, but MacDonald intends her to be read as a representative of God's love working through pain, suffering and death ultimately all to the greater good – similar to the wounds in the body of Christ, which suffering brings about the redemption of the entire world.

xxiii By placing the child Jesus on his shoulder, the Giant becomes a version of St. Christopher, a very popular saint martyred during the reign of the [Roman emperor Decius](#) (249–251). His feast day is celebrated by the Eastern Orthodox Church celebrates his feast day on 9 May. Legends about Saint Christopher were popularised by *The Golden Legend*, a thirteenth-century compilation of hagiographies by [Jacobus de Voragine](#) (First edition published 1470). Here he is described as 'of a right great stature' with 'terrible and fearful cheer and countenance', 'twelve cubits of length' who began life as Reprobis, a giant Canaanite. Reprobis wished to serve the greatest king that existed but was disturbed when he saw the king of Canaan cross himself for fear of the devil because this indicated that the devil was the more powerful of the two. Reprobis then set off to serve the devil, and joined a band of marauders because the leader told him that he was the devil. However, one day Reprobis witnessed the 'devil' avoiding a roadside cross out of fear, so then it seemed that Christ was even more powerful than the devil, so he set off to serve him, locating a hermit who could instruct him in the faith. The hermit suggested because of his great height and strength Reprobis could serve Christ by helping people cross a particularly dangerous river: 'Because thou art noble and high of stature and strong in thy members, thou shalt be resident by that river, and thou shalt bear over all them that shall pass there, which shall be a thing right convenable to our Lord Jesu Christ whom thou desirest to serve, and I hope he shall show himself to thee'. Reprobis moved to a shack beside the river and performed his service by carrying people on his shoulders (leading to his becoming the patron saint of travellers). While carrying travellers across the river, Reprobis would evangelise and this led to his running foul of the pagan king Dagnus of Samos who had Reprobis imprisoned and eventually executed for his Christian missionary work. Reprobis earned the name Christopher because in one story he carries Christ across the river. One day, while waiting to carry some travellers across the river, a small child asked to be carried. Reprobis agreed, but as they crossed the child became very heavy and it became more difficult to progress. The child said that he was the Christ child and was carrying the weight of the world upon his shoulders: 'the child was heavy as lead, and alway as he went farther the water increased and grew more, and the child more and more waxed heavy, insomuch that [he] had great anguish and was afraid to be drowned. And when he was escaped with great pain, and passed the water, and set the child aground, he said to the child: Child, thou hast put me in great peril; thou weighest almost as I had all the world upon me, I might bear no greater burden. And the child answered:... marvel thee nothing, for thou hast not only borne all the world upon thee, but thou hast borne him that created and made all the world, upon thy shoulders. I am Jesu Christ the king, to whom thou servest in this work'. In evidence, he made Reprobis' staff turn into a palm tree and sprout fruit. Jesus then renamed Reprobis Christopher, meaning 'Christ-bearer'. *The Golden Legend*, translated by William Caxton, ed. F. S. Ellis (Edinburgh: T. and A. Constable LTD., 1900), vol. 4, pp. 53-7. He is often depicted as a cannibalistic ogre with a dog-like face before his conversion to Christianity and his meeting with the child Jesus. Byzantine icons often depicted St. Christopher with a dog's head. See, for example, the representation of St. Christopher in the Book of Hours of Catherine of Clèves; the representation by Memling in a woodcut (1423); the woodcut by Lucas Cranach

(1506). See also the representation of Christopher by Titian, Rubens, and Massys. See J. T. Lionarons, 'From Monster to Martyr: The Old English Legend of St. Christopher', in *Marvels, Monsters, and Miracles: Studies in the Medieval and Early Modern Imaginations*, eds. T. S. Jones and D. A. Sprunger (Kalamazoo, 2002), pp. 167-82 ; F. Racine, 'Geography, Identity, and the Legend of St. Christopher', in *Religious Identity in Late Antiquity*, eds. R. M. Frakes and Digeser E. DePalma (Toronto, 2006), pp. 105-25; and also the children's story by Mrs. F. E. Richmond, *The Story of the Good Giant* (1882).



Hans Memling - St. Christopher (c. 1479-1480).





Peter Paul Rubens, *St. Christopher and the Hermit* (1611-14).



Quentin Massys, St. Christopher



[Albrecht Dürer](#), *St. Cristopher*, engraving (1521).

xxiv Clearly, this kiss is open to a pederastic interpretation, and it would seem strange to insist – as many have – that a ‘spiritual’ rather than a ‘physical’ love is being expressed between the Giant and the child. This kind of reading maintains a strangely unchristian dualism between the spirit and the body that would simply be alien to the kinds of Christian tradition referenced in the story, particularly with regard to the emphasis on stigmata towards the end of the tale. Critics are probably fearful of opening Wilde to the charge of harbouring paedophilic desires which is levelled at a number of canonical writers of children’s literature (especially Lewis Carroll and J. M. Barrie). There is a difference, however, between a sexual reading of the story, which can link together the mythological interest in fertility rites, creation myth and religious power, and the kind of reading a voyeur with a more prurient interest in what kind of sex Wilde himself preferred would perform – moving from hermeneutics to keyhole watching. Presumably, Wilde is here combining Christian ethics with the view of male relations he absorbed from Plato, which saw the sexual relationship between an older and younger man as a vehicle not just of sexual fulfilment but intellectual and spiritual development.

xxv The relationship between the Giant and the children is a startling one. We should remember that Edmund Burke had theorised that ‘It is impossible to suppose a giant the object of love. When we let our imaginations loose in romance, the ideas we naturally annex to that of size are those of tyranny, cruelty, injustice, and everything horrid and abominable. We paint the giant ravaging the country, plundering the innocent traveller, and afterwards gorged with his half-living flesh: such are Polyphemus, Cacus, and



others, who make so great a figure in romances and heroic poems. The event we attend to with the greatest satisfaction is their defeat and death. I do not remember, in all that multitude of deaths with which the Iliad is filled, that the fall of any man, remarkable for his great stature and strength, touches us with pity; nor does it appear that the author, so well read in human nature, ever intended it should'. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1990), p. 143.

xxvi It is important to note that the children have apparently not grown older.

xxvii The change in diction is crucial here as the religious inflection of the story shifts into a higher gear.

xxviii The child here is either Jesus Himself (most likely), or a Christ-figure. In either case, the child bears the stigmata, the wounds of Jesus' Passion on his hands and feet. The term 'stigmata' is from the Greek 'stigma', meaning a mark, and comes from St. Paul's Letter to the Galatians (6: 17): 'I bear on my body the marks of Jesus'. While it is generally held that St. Francis of Assisi is the first recorded stigmatic in history, the vast majority of stigmatics have been female. Francis, a saint greatly admired by Wilde, became a stigmatic in 1224 during a forty day fast after experiencing a vision of a crucified angel. As well as wounds on his hands and feet, Francis also displayed a wound in his side, corresponding to the wound Jesus received when a soldier pierced his side after the crucifixion. Other famous stigmatics include St. Catherine of Siena, St. Catherine of Ricci, St. Veronica Giuliani, and the most famous twentieth century stigmatic was Padre Pio. There are about twenty stigmatics recorded for the nineteenth century including Catherine Emmerich (1774-1824) – her visions went on to serve as inspiration for Mel Gibson's controversial *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), a very effective fusion of torture porn and Catholic devotion. The cases of Marie de Moerl (1812-68) and Louise Lateau (1850-83) were widely publicised and its is most probable that Wilde would have been at the very least aware of them. Marie de Moerl, a Tyrol inhabitant, was widely praised throughout the Catholic world, and was defended by both Cardinal Wiseman and Lord Shrewsbury in the English press. Louise Lateau became something of a *cause célèbre* throughout the Catholic world. An 18 year old girl when the stigmata appeared in April 1868, she attracted world wide attention, and was closely examined by priests and doctors to determine the cause of her wounds. The stigmata continued for many years, and Louise became an ecstatic, often impervious to heat or cold, and spending much time in a kind of beatific reverie (though bizarrely able to continue her work as a seamstress). She died in 1883 at the age of 33. Thousands of people visited her home during the period of her stigmata in hope of seeing the mystic. Although the stigmata are often read as indicative of a kind of Catholic pathology, dismissed as a hysterical consequence of body hatred, it is unlikely that the stigmata should be seen as part of an anti-body theology. The stigmata became widespread in a Europe where the humanity – and especially the bodily humanity – of Jesus was being strongly emphasised, and Christians were urged to become one with Christ through com-passion, suffering with Him and also rising with Him, effectively fusing the body of the believer with that of the Saviour. Through this means of *imitatio Christi*, the believer could become one with the full humanity of Jesus. The child in 'The Selfish Giant' emphasises, not a repulsion with the body, but physical suffering as an aspect of a greater mystery: 'These are the wounds of love'. This is a transformative rather than a masochistic embrace of suffering. See Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), pp.130-33; Augustus Rohling, *Louise Lateau: Her Stigmas and Ecstasy* (New York: Hickey, 1876); Judith Devlin, *The Superstitious Mind: French Peasants and the Supernatural in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987); Ted Harrison, *Stigmata: A Medieval Mystery in a Modern Age* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996). Wilde himself was clearly interested in stigmata, and frequently told a story about the phenomenon. It explained how Joseph of Arimethea rescued Jesus from the Cross so that he did not actually die. Jesus then fled Jerusalem and went to live anonymously. The disciples thought the missing body evidence of his resurrection, and Christianity appeared. One day, Paul arrives in the area where Jesus is now living, and manages to convert Jesus' friends to the new creed, but Jesus remains silent. When he dies, the wounds are discovered on his hands and feet and it is declared a miracle of stigmata. Versions of the story conveyed by Wilde can be found in: the recollections of the French writer Georges Maurevert in *Le Chant du cygne, contes parlés*

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*d'Oscar Wilde* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1942), p. 9; Frank Harris, *Unpath'd Waters* (London: John Lane, the Bodley Head, 1913), pp. 3-27 (unacknowledged as coming from Wilde); W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan, 1966), pp. 173-4. See *Table Talk Oscar Wilde*, ed. Thomas Wright (London: Cassell and Co., 2000), pp. 130-33.

xxix This echoes the words of Jesus to the 'good thief' in Luke 23:32-43: 'And there were also two other, malefactors, led with him to be put to death. And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left. Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do. And they parted his raiment, and cast lots. And the people stood beholding. And the rulers also with them derided him, saying, He saved others; let him save himself, if he be Christ, the chosen of God. And the soldiers also mocked him, coming to him, and offering him vinegar, And saying, If thou be the king of the Jews, save thyself. And a superscription also was written over him in letters of Greek, and Latin, and Hebrew, THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS. And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us. But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss. And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise'.

xxx Pear trees do have white blossoms, but Wilde may also be thinking here of the connection between white blossoms and fertility rites in the West of Ireland. Here the trees which were particularly associated with fertility traditions were small trees and shrubs such as the rowan, elderberry and whitethorn.